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# AMERICAN STATISTICAL ASSOCIATION.

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## REMARKS OF PRESIDENT WALKER AT WASHINGTON.

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NOTE.—The following remarks were made by President Walker at a meeting of the Washington members of the American Statistical Association held in the assembly room of the Cosmos Club, Washington, on the evening of December 31, 1896. The remarks were informal, and there was no opportunity for the speaker to revise the following report taken by a stenographer. The remarks are of interest, not only for their content, but also as constituting the last public utterance of President Walker.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN: It has given me very great pleasure to come on from Boston to attend this first meeting in Washington of the American Statistical Association, to bring the greetings of the Association to the Washington members, and to express the hope and the expectation of the Association that this new departure of holding scientific meetings in this city will result in a very great advantage not only to the Washington members themselves in their discussions and conferences in regard to matters of great interest, but also to the Association as a whole and to the country, one of whose important interests it is to promote the cause of sound and reliable statistics.

It is a very curious fact that the American people, with whom the interest in facts and data of an authoritative character is greater than anywhere else in the world, and who

are intensely and passionately devoted to statistics — it is a curious fact that the American people have never done anything as a nation, and little in their individual capacity, to promote the cultivation of statistics.

The United States have spent millions and tens of millions upon the collection, compilation, and publication of statistics, and yet they have never spent, perhaps, \$10,000 — certainly the government has never spent anything — in training and preparing the men who should conduct the statistical service of the country. It is a very striking fact if you think of it. We have an army and we have a military academy to prepare men to conduct the military science in war and in peace ; we have a navy and we have a naval academy to prepare men to conduct the service of the navy in war and in peace ; and the budgets of the military and the naval academy form no inconsiderable feature of the annual appropriations for these two services.

Now, if our government and our people had said they did not care about statistics, and would pay nothing for them — did not care to be troubled with quantitative statements in regard to population, wealth, industry, and vitality of the people — it would have been intelligent and consistent ; but when one considers the enormous sums that have been spent in this country for statistics — the millions every ten years for the decennial census, and the million or so every year for statistical service in other departments of the government — it certainly seems very unwise that the government has never done anything to train men who should conduct these services. I do not believe that it is at all an exaggeration of the fact to say that if one per cent of what the United States Government has spent upon statistics had been devoted to the training and preparation of men to conduct our statistical service, it would have saved at least a third of the cost of all the statistics collected in the past, and would have enhanced and improved the quality of the results almost indefinitely. In the lack of such training

we have always suffered great impairment of the validity, accuracy, and comparability of our public statistics—national, state, and municipal; and we have encountered expenses that were heaped up by reason of the fact that the work was in the hands of those who necessarily were ignorant of the elementary principles attending the collection and compilation of statistics and the administration of statistical service. It seems a very strange thing indeed.

Our statistical work, national, state, and municipal, has fallen into the hands, almost without exception, so far as my limited knowledge extends, of men of intelligence, with perhaps a very deep interest in their subject—certainly men of fidelity, conscientiousness, and zeal without measure—but men who have had not only no training in statistical methods and in statistical administration, but have also lacked that elementary knowledge of the subject which was necessary to save them from making great errors of judgment, and sometimes monstrous errors in their conclusions.

I do not know of a single man now holding, or who has ever held, a position in this country as the head of a statistical bureau, or as chief of a statistical service, or as a statistician, who had any elementary training for his work. All those who have had anything to do with American statistics came into the service comparatively late in life, without any elementary training, sometimes taking up the most gigantic piece of work, the service even extending over this entire country with its twenty, thirty, fifty, seventy millions of people, and two or three millions of square miles, simply with an interest in the subject as the only guaranty of their competency for the service. Now, it certainly does not seem wise. I have no doubt that an enormous loss of resources and a very great impairment of our statistics have resulted, and it is all the more to be regretted, and all the more a matter of surprise, if one may use the expression, regarding what happened so long ago and has so long continued, that a people who are willing to pay anything for sta-

tistics; whose public men and whose writers on financial, economic, and sociological topics desire first and foremost to have quantitative statements at their command; whose newspapers revel in statistics, even though their readers cannot read the tables either up or down; I say it is all the more a matter of surprise that such a people should permit this service to be carried on habitually by those who have no training for the work. And as if to render it impossible that this service should improve from time to time, as if to prevent the results of experience from being enjoyed in later years, our legislators have provided that at the conclusion of every census—and only with this single branch of our work—the service shall be broken up, the army shall be disbanded, the personnel shall be scattered, leaving us at the beginning of another national enumeration in the position of a country like our own in 1861, which was called upon to raise, and equip, and organize, and put into the field a great army of raw volunteers. Thus it is that from one census to another it has been impossible to retain in the government service, or, at any rate, to secure for that particular branch of the government service, men who at the beginning of another census might officer the affairs.

Now, while our government has been thus delinquent—if I may venture as a humble citizen to use the expression—in this matter, strangely enough our colleges and universities have done almost nothing in the direction which was of so very great importance. It is only within a comparatively short period, as you know, that our colleges and universities have given any serious attention to political science, history, and economics; and it is only within a very short time that the word “statistics” has been used in connection with any professorial chair or any department of instruction in any American college. Our American colleges began teaching history, which has its basis in statistics, without recognizing statistics in their curriculum. They began to teach economics, which, if it is to be sound, should be founded upon

statistics, without teaching statistics or even recognizing it in their curricula.

But whatever has been done in the course of our history toward promoting the study of statistics as a science, to prepare for the statistical service of the government, by far the greater part has been done by the American Statistical Association, whose first meeting in Washington is to be held here this evening.

About fifty-six years ago Dr. Edward Jarvis, a learned physician of Dorchester, now a part of the city of Boston, called around him a few faithful souls and organized the American Statistical Association, of which he remained the president and the active spirit for thirty-three or thirty-four years. Dr. Jarvis was a man who, in Europe, with his knowledge of his subject and his interest in it, would have been a councilor of state and would have had the recognition which others have had who worked as he did under such great disadvantage. The Association never had any funds. Now and then the treasurer sent bills to members for their small fees toward the expenses of a hall or of a meeting, and although the meetings for a generation met with no encouragement or without a single sign of deep interest, the Association was maintained. The fire was kept burning on the altar and the flag was kept waving in the air. At least there should be an American Statistical Association; at least it was the determination of those gentlemen, almost all of them men of the most limited means and resources for carrying on such work, that it should be known that there was a body of men in the United States devoted to the cultivation of statistical science. Not only so, but the Association, and Dr. Jarvis especially, who represented the Association, had a great deal to do with successive enumerations of the United States.

In 1850, and again in 1860, the American Statistical Association memorialized Congress, and conferred with officers appointed by the government, for the purpose of formulating the schedules of inquiry and promoting the success of the

administration. Dr. Jarvis did a great deal in shaping the schedules of 1850, and again in 1860. And at one of those censuses he was very actively engaged for some years in connection with the statistics of mortality and the statistics of the unfortunate classes, particularly the insane. That work was most important work. It had a great deal to do with the development of the American census from its crude, immature form into the shape it now has. In 1870 again Dr. Jarvis, though then in very advanced years, showed his interest and did whatever was in his power to promote the work of the census.

After Dr. Jarvis's lamented death the American Statistical Association took a forward step. It determined that it would cease to be, as it always had been, a local association. Its membership was enlarged until it now numbers many hundreds, comprising men of the highest distinction in, I presume, twenty of the States of the Union and in most of our important cities. With such an enlarged membership the management, though still destitute of great endowments, determined to undertake the publication of a quarterly journal, which, I do not hesitate to say, is entitled to credit in holding most closely to its purpose in giving purely statistical information; in avoiding all financial and economic and sociological discussions; in confining itself to the formulation of statistical schedules and presenting statistical information from every country. We have also great reason to believe that it has done much to promote the study of statistics in colleges and in universities, and that its work in the future will be even greater and more fruitful.

At the last meeting of the American Statistical Association it was determined to invite and empower the members of the Association residing in and about the city of Washington to hold scientific meetings in Washington as a part of the regular proceedings of the Association. It was felt that this must have a great influence: first, in promoting the discussion of statistical methods, statistical results and statistical principles

among the members here, who constitute so large and important a part of the membership of the Association; second, that it must strengthen the Association itself throughout its whole body to have such an example of vital interest in so great a work exhibited here, and to have such discussions and conferences going on in an important center of population. But it was felt that the result of the greatest importance which could be anticipated from this new enterprise, was the establishment of a better, more distinct, and sympathetic relationship between those who are here in Washington, making the statistics of the country — producing them, if I may use that expression — and the consumers throughout the land, writers in economics and finance, editors of newspapers, writers for magazines, and professors in colleges, who are using or consuming them. It is felt that such a relationship cannot fail to be of very great value. You know how it is with the newspaper editor, with the magazine writer, with the teacher of economics, sociology, or finance, in the college or the university. He takes the statistics which are given to him as if they were written upon a table of stone and brought down from some snow-capped mountain. He does not discuss them, he does not question them, and as he has not been behind the scenes himself, and has had nothing to do with getting up statistics, he takes them as data, which, if I have not forgotten my forty-years-old Latin, means "things given," and given of grace, and so he uses them without discrimination, without question,— fortunate if he use them without any mental doubt or hesitation.

Now, what we want is that the statisticians of the United States Government, and those who are closely connected with government service here in Washington, and have to do with the making of statistics, shall be in intimate relations with those who are to use them; that they shall be able to say, without any feeling of disparaging their profession, or of slurring their own work, "*These statistics should be shaded;*" "*these* may be regarded as accu-

rate within the limits of any use to which they may be put ; " *these* are put forward simply as the best thing we could get." Now, that has not been the tone of official statistics. Of course, some government officers have had the honesty and the brutal frankness to say that sort of thing, but in general the feeling of the public official is that he must not query his own figures—that he must not express, at least in more than a very mild intimation, his own doubts or hesitations. It is natural ; it is characteristic of the public official ; in a certain sense it is his duty, just as it is the duty of any one of us to stand up for his own city, or his own church, or his own college, or his own anything with which he is connected, with a certain degree of self-assertion. On the other hand, it is desirable that the men who use statistics throughout the country, the consumers of statistics, as I have called them, shall have such knowledge, and such correspondence with the men who prepare the statistics for their use, that they shall feel at liberty and be in condition to get the most genuine feeling and impression and conviction of the statistician himself in regard to the degree of error which may exist, or in regard to the conditions and qualifications under which the official statistics may be safely used.

We all know, at least those of us who have had anything to do with statistics, that there is a wide range in that respect. It is important that the official statistician be encouraged to give the user of statistics those (as we say) " tips " on the market, suggestions of hesitation or doubt of a possible limitation or qualification, or perhaps of extensive limitation or qualification. It is desirable that the persons who are to use statistics—and every writer of history, economics, or sociology must use statistics—should be taught to observe the limitation necessarily imposed upon the validity and authority of the figures they use, and be encouraged by association, by correspondence, and by acquaintance, through a body like the American Statistical Association, to confer freely together.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, it is with these feelings and thoughts that I came on here from Boston, as one who has been intrusted for some years with the presidency of the American Statistical Association, to express the very great gratification we all feel that this series of meetings is to be held in Washington; to offer our heartiest support and sympathy and coöperation in your work here; and to wish the Washington members of the Association the greatest possible success. The meetings of the Association will be presided over, so far as he is able to attend to that duty, by one of the Washington members, who is a member of the International Statistical Institute, the head of the United States Department of Labor; and, I am happy to add, a man bred in Massachusetts, and who first acquired his reputation for absolute integrity of statistical work and for mastery of statistical methods in our good Commonwealth. I have great pleasure in surrendering the chair to Colonel Wright.